



**2015 National Underground Railroad Conference  
Hilton Head Island, South Carolina  
Call for Presentations**

The National Park Service, National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom (NTF) Program and friends, will host its annual 2015 National Underground Railroad Conference in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, June 17-20, 2015. The theme for this year's conference is **Into the Light: Striving for Freedom and 'an equal chance in the battle of life'**. We will explore the transition from enslavement to freedom before, during, and after the Civil War, commemorate the sesquicentennial of the end of the Civil War, and the adoption of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. This year provides a unique opportunity to pause and reflect on the meaning of freedom. The location selected for this year's conference is particularly significant since Mitchelville was established there in 1862. As the first self-governing town of formerly enslaved people in this country, it was a population center of the Port Royal Experiment which has been termed the "Rehearsal for Reconstruction." Mitchelville and the associated Fort Howell, are the first two members of the NTF in South Carolina. The South Carolina Lowcountry is also an appropriate setting since forty percent of Africans brought to North America between 1619 and 1808 came through Charleston and today, sixty percent of African Americans can trace their ancestral lineage there. The Lowcountry provides a perfect venue to discuss the diffusion, legacy and contribution Africans had on the founding of our country.

The Underground Railroad—the resistance to enslavement through escape and flight—played a role in provoking the Civil War, which cleared the way for a "new birth of freedom." While Abraham Lincoln proclaimed this destiny for the nation, it also describes the transformations of individuals as they moved from enslavement to a life of self-determination. Robert Smalls freed himself, his crew and their families when he commandeered a Confederate ship *Planter* in 1862, and surrendered it to the Union Navy. During reconstruction Smalls held a variety of political offices and helped create the first public schools in South Carolina, helping his people to have "an equal chance in the battle of life." Mrs. Isaac Riley compared her life in Buxton, Ontario to her life in slavery: "There we were in darkness,--here we are in light."<sup>1</sup> John A. Hunter in Toronto described feeling "more like a man...than I did a year ago. A year ago I was in bondage."<sup>2</sup> Coming from Maryland and settling in Toronto, Robert Belt acknowledged "I feel much better satisfied for myself since I have been free, than when I was a slave,"<sup>3</sup> but he echoed Harriet Tubman's lament that his friends were still bound in slavery. The transition happened for

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Drew, *A Northside View of Slavery*, (Cleveland: John P. Jewett & Co., 1856), p 301.

<sup>2</sup> Drew, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Drew, p. 112-113.

millions in 1865, but as the Underground Railroad resistance movement grew leading up to the war, thousands achieved this cherished state earlier.

This conference will explore all aspects of the transition from slavery to freedom, both at the individual and societal scale. How did individuals, communities and the nation rebuild their lives after the dislocation of such a profound change? Freedom seekers making a new life in a strange location starting usually with no resources worked hard to establish a secure life for themselves and their families. Enslaved people freed by the end of the Civil War, often left in search of separated family members. Some stayed and continued to work the same land under new arrangements. Slaveholders sought new ways to operate devastated farms, plantations, or businesses and re-establish the means of production. The structure and “rules” that organized society for much of the nation were no longer valid—how did African Americans and whites at all levels of society determine their role in the new order? In what ways is the United States still addressing these challenges?

The Conference Program Committee welcomes proposals from a wide variety of scholars, community researchers, site stewards, educators and others interested in Underground Railroad history. Some ideas for presentation topics include, but are not limited to:

- How did freedom seekers make a life in freedom? What happened to family members left behind? When and how were they re-united, or were they separated forever?
- What were the psychological impacts of freedom on the individuals and on society?
- In what ways did the Underground Railroad contribute to the ultimate end of slavery?
- What geographic dis-locations occurred as a result of ending slavery?
- What did African American mobility look like immediately after the Civil War?
- How did individuals, communities or the nation change as a result of obtaining freedom and the end of slavery? What were some of the institutions built by freedom seekers?
- What did the end of slavery mean for the enslaved? slaveholders? poor whites? free blacks? northerners? abolitionists? Underground Railroad activists?
- In what ways were the patterns of slavery re-established? In what ways was society different after 1865?
- How was freedom constructed through land owning, clothing, institution building, etc.
- What role did emigration movements such as to Canada, Haiti, or Liberia play in seeking freedom?

### **Submission Procedure—MUST BE SUBMITTED ONLINE**

Proposals should be submitted electronically through the Organization of American Historians website at <http://proposals.oah.org/nurc/>.

Proposals can be submitted for (1) panels up to three individuals and a moderator on a particular theme or topic and (2) individual 20 minute presentations. Individual submissions that are accepted will be placed on a panel by the Program Committee. Conference applications will be reviewed by the 2015 Conference Program Committee.

### **Deadline for receipt of proposals: March 2, 2015**

All proposals should include:

A complete mailing address, email, phone number and affiliations (if any) for each participant;  
A 500 word abstract for the complete session and 250 word abstract for individual submissions; and  
A 125 word biographical sketch for each participant.

**Registration fee for presenters will be \$100, a discounted rate.** Presenters are responsible for their own conference travel, lodging, transportation, and meals.

***Accepted presenters can expect to receive notification by March 30, 2015***

For more information, please visit our website: [www.nps.gov/ugrr](http://www.nps.gov/ugrr) or contact:

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